

The Madras Anti-Hindi Agitation, 1965

Political Protest and its Effects on Language Policy in India

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January 26, 1965, the fifteenth anniversary of the coming into force of the Constitution of India, marked the end of the period in which English rather than Hindi could, according to the terms of the Constitution, be used for all official purposes.¹ In spite of many efforts to assure the non-Hindi-speaking people of India that the change-over to Hindi would not be precipitate and that their legitimate interests would be safeguarded, there was much alarm in the non-Hindi areas, leading to bitter agitation and violent protest, particularly in the State of Madras. No agitation

¹The paper is based on personal observation of the agitation in Madras city; on conversations with individuals involved on both sides of the dispute; and on a careful analysis of the Indian press during the relevant period, particularly *The Hindu* (Madras) which gave a very full coverage of the events. Among other studies which should be consulted for further details of the course of events are Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr., "The Riots in Tamilnad: Problems and Prospects of India's Language Crisis," *Asian Survey*, Vol. V, No. 8, August, 1965, pp. 399–407, and Michael Brecher, *Succession in India*, London, 1966, pp. 151–67. Hardgrave gives an account of the agitation as seen from Madurai but is not much concerned with the reconsideration of language policy by government and the complicated chain reaction in state and national politics. These subjects are taken up in more detail by Brecher whose study of the decision-making process is illuminating in spite of one or two doubtful judgements. Thus, he repeats the tale that the constitutional provisions making Hindi the official language were approved by only one vote in the Constituent Assembly in 1949 (p. 152). This is without foundation, although it is true that Dr. Ambedkar reported that at a meeting of the Congress members of the Assembly it was decided by a majority of one that the party should support the provisions relating to Hindi when these come to be debated (See Hugh Tinker, *India and Pakistan: A Political Analysis*, New York, 1963, p. 133; A. K. Majumdar, *The Problem of Hindi: A Study*, Bombay, 1965, pp. 35–57; Granville Austin, *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation*, Oxford, 1966, ch. 12, esp. pp. 299–300). It is also misleading of Brecher to suggest that the agitation began with the self-immolation of two DMK workers (p. 156). The student agitation was already under way on January 25. And to cite "foreign observers" as saying that there were 500 deaths in the course of the agitation is to give currency to completely unsubstantiated rumors.

of similar intensity and scale had ever before been known in Madras, and it demonstrated deep-seated dissatisfaction with the language policy of the Government of India and the mounting strength of some new political forces. This article concentrates on the agitation in Madras State and the response to it on the part of Indian policy-makers. Its purpose is to throw some light on the dynamics of protest and the process of adjustment between public opinion and official policy in modern India.

Language agitation in India is no new thing and has exercised considerable influence over national policy since independence. National leaders may often have deplored the intense emotions which complicate all consideration of questions of language policy, but a long series of concessions to popular agitation has tended to encourage further agitation among those who feel that some particular policy threatens their interests. Most previous language agitation, however, concerned the setting up of linguistic states; the Madras agitation differed in that it involved the question of the official language to be used by government and only to a very minor extent was the status of Tamil in question. Not the protection of Tamil but the future of Tamilians in a nation with Hindi as its official language was in doubt.

Hindi had been suggested as the most suitable official language for the Indian Union after independence by the Motilal Nehru Report of 1928. The Constitution lays down that the official language of the Union shall be Hindi in Devanagari script and further, that "It shall be the duty of the Union to promote the spread of the Hindi language, to develop it so that it may serve as a medium of expression for all the elements of the composite culture of India, and to secure its enrichment by assimilating without interfering with its genius the forms, style, and expression used in Hindustani and the other languages of India and by drawing, whenever necessary or desirable, for its vocabulary, primarily on Sanskrit and secondarily on other languages."² English, however, was to continue as the second official language for a period of fifteen years and longer if Parliament so decided. An Official Language Commission appointed under the terms of the Constitution in 1955 to review the situation supported Hindi as the sole official language although members from Bengal and Madras dissented in favour of English.

In practice, in the state governments and legislatures, the regional language is now used for most purposes, although authoritative texts are often still in English. In the Union Parliament, English is still used more than Hindi and regional languages rarely make an appearance. Administration at the higher levels has been almost entirely in English, and English is the main "link language" for communication between the states. English remains the language of commerce and is still generally

² *Constitution of India*, Article 351.

the medium for higher education, particularly in scientific subjects. All over India, English remains a “prestige language,” although in some areas, particularly in north India, there is strong anti-English feeling.

According to the 1961 Census,³ 1652 languages or dialects are spoken in India. Out of a total population of 439 million, 133.4 million were recorded as speakers of Hindi. There are thus considerably more Hindi speakers than speakers of any other single language in India but they are still a minority of the total population. Tamil — the language of Madras State — is spoken by 30.6 million and, if the principal cognate Dravidian languages (Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada) are taken together, there are 102.7 million who speak a Dravidian rather than an Indo-European language. Very few Indians have English as their mother tongue but of the 30 million who know two languages “a little more than eleven million”⁴ know English while 9.36 million have Hindi as a second language. Only a tiny minority of a little under three % know English and even where knowledge of English is highest,⁵ it nowhere exceeds five %. This small minority, however, is fairly evenly spread throughout the country whereas there are large areas of India outside the “Hindi heartland” where the number of Hindi speakers is very low indeed.⁶

This even spread of the English-knowing elite is one argument commonly used in favour of the retention of English, for it is argued that although so few speak English, it alone is capable of serving as a “link language” which can guarantee the political unity of India. But probably the more effective argument of the protagonists of English is that the imposition of Hindi would give a major advantage in terms of job and educational possibilities to those who have Hindi as their mother tongue.

The Constitution laid down what is in effect a program for the development of Hindi and the replacement of English within fifteen years — an incredibly brief period for a linguistic revolution so complicated. In pursuance of this aim the Chief Ministers of the various states adopted in 1961 the “Three-language Formula,” according to which *both* English and Hindi were to be used as link languages and taught in schools throughout India indefinitely, while the regional language was to be the medium in education and state and local administration. In effect this meant two languages for the Hindi-speaking states and three for the others. An ambitious Tamilian, for instance, would have to learn three languages and three

³Figures taken from *India — A Reference Annual: 1965*.

⁴These and the following figures are cited from the Census of India, 1961 by the Secretary of the Education Commission. *The Hindu*, July 6, 1965.

⁵Bengal: 4.6%; Kerala: 4.4%; Punjab: 4.2%; and Madras: 4.1%. Cf. S. Mohan Kumaramangalam: *India's Language Crisis*, Madras, 1965, pp. 80–81

⁶Mysore: 1.28%; Andhra: 1.21%; Kerala: 0.21%; Madras: 0.20%. Cited in *The Hindu*, July 6, 1965.

entirely different scripts and some Indian children would face the task of learning four languages: their mother tongue, the regional language, English, and Hindi.⁷ The Three-language Formula therefore imposes a great educational burden, particularly on the people of the non-Hindi states. Furthermore, it is a policy and not a statute, and the more ardent protagonists of Hindi have been insisting that the Constitution's fifteen years' protection to English should not be extended, and that English should be eliminated as quickly as possible. Such moves seriously alarmed the non-Hindi speakers because they seemed to confer an unfair advantage on the Hindi speakers of the North. Jawaharlal Nehru's assurance in 1959 that Hindi would never be imposed on the non-Hindi areas without their consent and its reaffirmation by Shastri did not put such fears to rest.

The programme of Hindi-ization laid down in Chapter XVII of the Constitution in elaborate detail was not, and could not have been, carried through in fifteen years. Accordingly in 1963 an Official Languages Act (No. 19 of 1963) was passed, making possible the continued use of English in politics, administration, and the courts both at the Centre and in the states. Section 3 of the Act states that "the English language may, as from the appointed day, continue to be used, in addition to Hindi," for all official purposes and for transactions in Parliament. This does not, of course, halt the process of Hindi-ization, it merely makes possible (but not obligatory) a slowing down of that process and non-Hindi speakers felt that it fell short of giving statutory force to Mr. Nehru's verbal guarantee. Accordingly it failed to calm the fears of the non-Hindi states, which became even more acute with the death of Pandit Nehru in May, 1964. His successor, Lal Bahadur Shastri, was not trusted as Nehru had been.

The Dravidian languages of the South, particularly Tamil, are highly developed languages with a classical literature comparable with that in Sanskrit. This century has seen a major revival of Tamil culture which has manifested itself in an intensive effort to purify the Tamil language of all Sanskritic influence. Cultural renaissance has led to a growing self-confidence, a new awareness of a distinct Tamilian identity, and a deepening suspicion of all things northern. Anti-Brahminism and a rejection of traditional Hinduism as an import from the North have found ardent exponents. There have been widespread protests against the industrial dominance of the North, and an attitude of Tamil chauvinism has been generated. These feelings found their first political expression in the old Justice Party, which viewed British rule as the only alternative to Brahmin dominance; then in the eccentric E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker's

⁷See R. B. Le Page, *The National Language Question: Linguistic Problems of Newly Independent States*, London, 1964, p. 57.

Self-Respect Movement; and finally in the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam or DMK (Dravidian Progressive Federation), a party particularly influential among students, which was until recently explicitly committed to the setting up of an independent Dravidian state in south India.⁸

Tamil nationalism hitherto has seldom expressed itself in violence. Both under the British and in independent India the Tamilians have had a somewhat privileged position, partly on account of their reputation for hard work, which has made them much sought after as labour, partly because the standard of education and knowledge of English have been somewhat higher than elsewhere and consequently Tamilians have secured a large share of appointments in government service and education.⁹ Perhaps because of this, Tamil linguistic feeling has never turned against English, as has happened in other parts of India. English, so far from being a threat to Tamil, is the tool Tamilians use for the advancement and protection of their interests. Accordingly there has been very little pressure to replace English as the medium of higher education in Tamilnad, and it required only the suggestion that English was to be replaced by Hindi to provoke a violently adverse reaction, particularly among students but also among the illiterate masses. Those whose personal interests would be completely unaffected by a change of official language could easily be persuaded to see 'Hindi imperialism' as part of a larger plot by the North to dominate the South culturally, economically, and politically. Students, lawyers, and businessmen, indeed the Madras middle class generally, see their interests as tied to the continuance of English as the language of government and the courts and, more particularly, as the medium for the Union Public Service Commission competitive examinations. Northerners and Southerners start from the same point in English; the introduction of Hindi would impose a serious handicap on those for whom it is not the mother tongue.

The DMK has grown considerably in influence in recent years. In 1957 it won thirteen out of two hundred and five seats in the Madras Legislative Assembly; in 1962 it increased its strength to fifty seats. The DMK also controls the Madras Corporation

⁸Useful background material is to be found in P. D. Devanandan, *The Dravida Kazhagam*, Bangalore, 1960; Robert L. Hardgrave, *The Dravidian Movement*, Bombay, 1965; Robert L. Hardgrave, "The DMK and the Politics of Tamil Nationalism," *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 4, 1964-65; and Lloyd I. Rudolph, "Urban Life and Populist Radicalism: Dravidian Politics in Madras," *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. XX, No. 3, May 1961, pp. 283-97.

⁹From 1948-1962 Madras State filled a higher proportion of places in the Indian Administrative Services through competitive examinations than any other state. Madras produced 23.3% of the total entry. Next came U.P. with 16.5%, Punjab with 12%, and Delhi with 7.8%. Note that during that period the area of the state shrunk through rearrangement of boundaries. In spite of this, Madras continues to be a leader in the number of places secured. See *The Hindu*, April 8, 1963.

and a number of other important towns. In policy and strategy the DMK has made some remarkable *volte-faces*, but it has been consistently deeply involved in protests against Hindi.

In late 1964 two things in particular aroused once more the old fears of “Hindi imperialism.” Alarm at official pressure to replace English with Hindi as speedily as possible grew as Republic Day, January 26, 1965, approached. Neither the Official Languages Act 1963, nor Mr. Nehru’s assurances of 1959, frequently reiterated by him and by other leaders, were adequate to convince the South that its position would not be grievously weakened when the constitutional protection for the status of English expired. And well-publicized moves to introduce Hindi as an alternative medium to English for the Union Public Services examination in 1965 seemed to confirm the worst fears of the Tamilians. Nothing could convince them that ignorance of Hindi would not prove a serious bar to appointment and promotion in government service and that from 1965 the Hindi-speakers would not hold a highly privileged position in India.

The DMK seized upon these fears as a very convenient weapon against the Tamilnad Congress Party, which has made hardly a cheep of protest against the official language policy and has insisted that there was no ground for alarm. A Madras State Anti-Hindi Conference, held at Tiruchirapalli on January 17, 1965, was largely inspired by DMK, but was also attended by representatives of most of the other opposition parties and supported by some wealthy Tamilian industrialists. Warm popular support encouraged the Conference to declare Republic Day a “Day of Mourning” in protest against the expiry of constitutional protection for English.¹⁰ In the short January session of the Madras legislature, opposition members pressed the Government as hard as possible on the language issue but the Madras Government made it clear that it was not concerned to seek an alteration of the national language policy and that it would permit no “mourning” or anti-Hindi agitation on Republic Day. The Government position was that nothing substantive would be changed on January 26, and to observe mourning on such a national festival would be tantamount to subversion.¹¹

The stage was now set for conflict between the Congress Government of Madras and a popular movement led by the chief opposition party. But the scale and the development of the conflict were anticipated by none.

The DMK announced on January 24, 1965, that it would defy the government ban on demonstrations on Republic Day. The agitation, however, started unexpectedly

¹⁰ *The Hindu*, January 18, 1965 and S. Mohan Kumaramangalam, *op. cit.*, pp. 84–86.

¹¹ *The Hindu*, January 23 and 24, 1965.

the following day and was mainly the work of students. The Congress offices in Madurai were stoned and some students were injured in a police *lathi* charge and in brawls with Congress workers. In Madras, Hindi books were burnt on the beach and a large gathering of students marched to the Secretariat to demand a constitutional amendment protecting the position of English. In the early morning of January 26, C. N. Annadurai and about a hundred and fifty other DMK leaders were arrested. As a consequence, the mourning meetings and processions planned by the party did not take place but agitation among students continued and the police used tear gas at Pachaiyappa's College in Madras. On January 27, in the early morning, the police raided hostels at a number of colleges in Madras and arrested student leaders. It is alleged that there was a good deal of indiscriminate beating-up of students, which inflamed the situation considerably.¹² In Annamalai University, south of Madras, the police opened fire and a student was killed. Two DMK supporters burned themselves to death — a mode of protest novel to India — and a further one hundred and ten DMK leaders were arrested. All colleges were closed by order of the Government and the Chief Minister refused even to meet a delegation of students.¹³ Prime Minister Shastri's statements calling for a quicker change-over to Hindi and stern measures against the agitators did not improve the situation. The Prime Minister gave no hint of a change of policy and his earlier remark in a speech at Santiniketan on December 23, 1964 that to seek to retain English for all time as the official language of India "seems to me a deeply humiliating proposition" still rankled.¹⁴ On January 29 there was another death in police firing in Palayamkottai and another DMK supporter killed himself in protest against "Hindi imperialism" — this time using bug poison. The first wave of the agitation was now over, and there was relative but uneasy calm in Madras State for about a week.

On February 8 the colleges reopened but the vast majority of the students remained on strike and the agitation resumed with increased force. No longer was it limited to students and active DMK supporters; it seemed to have become a popular movement and now advantage was sometimes taken of the disturbed conditions to settle old scores against the police. In Coimbatore there was a complete *hartal* (general strike), trains were stopped, and in many places there were police *lathi*-charges. On February 10 the police fired in seven places, twenty-four people were killed and twenty-five injured. Two police sub-inspectors were burnt alive by an enraged mob in Tiruppur. On the eleventh, once again there was police firing in

¹²This statement is based on eye-witness accounts. Protests against police excesses later came from at least two college principals and some doctors.

¹³*The Hindu*, January 28, 1965.

¹⁴*The Hindu*, December 24, 1964.

several places. The Prime Minister broadcast to the nation, reaffirming once more that there would be no imposition of Hindi. T. T. Krishnamachari, the Union Minister of Finance and himself a Tamilian, broadcast in Tamil saying that the agitation was unnecessary as Tamilian ministers such as himself and C. Subramaniam (Minister of Food) would look after the interests of the South. Ironically enough, it was at almost the same time in Delhi that Subramaniam and a junior minister from Madras, O. V. Alagesan, handed in their resignations to the Prime Minister in protest against the Government's language policy as expressed in the Prime Minister's broadcast.

On February 12 there was complete *hartal* throughout Madras State. Twenty people were killed in police firing in eleven places. The situation was now obviously out of control and police and troops were brought into Madras in large numbers from other states. Fifteen people were shot dead on February 13, making an official total of sixty-six deaths in the course of the agitation.¹⁵ After another long closure colleges reopened again on March 8. For a week attempts were made to resume the agitation, but by March 15 most colleges were working normally. The agitation had run its course, but the shock and the scars remained.

The agitation demonstrated a poor level of communication between government and people. Neither the Government of Madras nor the Government of India seem to have assessed correctly the intensity of popular feeling on the language issue in the South. So no serious attempt was made prior to the agitation either to modify the language policy or to present it in a more favourable light to the people of Madras and the other non-Hindi states. The obvious unpreparedness of government for an agitation on this scale demonstrates that it was taken by surprise; and the extremely vacillating and uncertain handling of the developing crisis shows the inadequacy of official understanding of the state of public opinion.

Language policy was discussed at the Chief Ministers' meeting in December 1964, but it does not seem that any warning note was heard. The Madras Chief Minister, on his return from this meeting, said that the interests of Tamilnad would not suffer.¹⁶ Southern ministers in the central Government kept quiet until the agitation was well under way, and even the All-India Congress President, Kumaraswamy Kamaraj, a Tamilian of the Tamilians, was apparently taken aback and hesitated to show his hand. Congress party channels conveyed no warning of the impending explosion and Congressmen made no effort to avert it by conciliatory statements or modification of policy.

It would seem that the Madras Government believed that the agitation was being

¹⁵ Rumours put the total considerably higher. *The Hindu*, February 25, 1965.

¹⁶ *The Hindu*, December 16, 1964.

whipped up by the DMK and had no substantial popular base.¹⁷ Prompt and tough action against the core leadership of the DMK could therefore be expected to nip the trouble in the bud, and possibly permanently cripple the chief opposition party in the process. Such a policy explains the Madras Government's refusal to allow any demonstrations at all on Republic Day, the mass arrests of DMK leaders, the early morning arrests and beatings-up in college hostels, and the Chief Minister's refusal to meet with the leaders of the student agitation.

The Madras Government's attempts to deal with the situation by radical measures during the first three days were based on fundamental misunderstanding of the intensity and scale of popular dissatisfaction, and contributed a great deal to inflame the masses of the people. When it became obvious that the Government's initial calculations were wide of the mark, there followed a second stage in which rather improbable explanations of the forces at work were bandied around in official quarters. It was suggested that the Left Wing of the Communist Party (which is very weak in Tamilnad) was behind the agitation, or that some wealthy mill-owners, or dissident college teachers, had instigated the trouble.¹⁸ At no stage was it admitted that the agitation arose from a relatively spontaneous outburst of popular resentment.

The Union Government apparently believed that the whole agitation was based on "misunderstanding" of the official language policy.¹⁹ The attempts of Lal Bahadur Shastri, G. L. Nanda (Home Minister), and T. T. Krishnamachari to explain the Government's stand made little, if any, impression on public opinion in Madras, which was demanding concessions, not clarifications. Had these statements been made earlier, they might have helped to ease the situation but by February 11 the agitation had become a mass movement with considerable impetus, deeply distrustful of the Government on account of police behaviour in the early stages. When the Government of Madras and the Government of India decided that better communication was necessary it was already too late. Only decisive action or clear and unequivocal promises to modify policy could have mended the situation so late in the day.

¹⁷Statements by the Chief Minister and various ministers in the Legislative Assembly, reported in *The Hindu*, January 23 and 24, 1965.

¹⁸Statement of the Chief Minister, reported in *The Hindu*, February 7, 1965. Chief Minister to Tamilnad Congress Committee, *The Hindu*, June 21, 1965. See also *The Hindu*, February 14, 1965. cf. Brecher: *op. cit.*, p. 159.

¹⁹Mr. Nanda felt the agitation was "based on gross misunderstanding." *The Hindu*, January 28, 1965. Lal Bahadur Shastri suggested that those who opposed Hindi must understand that what government was doing was in pursuance of the Directive Principles of the Constitution. *Ibid.* See also the Madras Chief Minister's statement at Vellore reported in *The Hindu*, January 26, 1965.

Why was communication so poor between government and people? In theory, state legislatures and Parliament in Delhi should convey popular feeling to the Government. But in both Madras and Delhi the Congress Party had overwhelming majorities and party discipline tends to bottle up criticism from the Congress benches. Congress MPs and MLAs are reluctant to challenge government even on issues where feeling is strong in their constituencies. In the debate on language policy in Parliament on February 18, for instance, no Congress MP from Madras spoke, and during the Budget Session of the Madras Legislative Assembly starting on March 1, hardly a critical note was heard from Congress MLAs. Both in Delhi and in Madras the Opposition was very vocal, but it is small and divided and there is little to suggest that government listens carefully to opposition criticism; too often, radical criticism is dismissed as subversive and Congress governments are not above attempting to intimidate unwelcome opponents. Again, it is generally true that Congress governments in the states are more responsive to the central organs of the party than to public opinion within their own state. Many state governments are more the creatures of the Congress Parliamentary Board than of the state legislature, and more answerable to the Congress High Command in Delhi than to local opinion. The state government, and particularly the Chief Minister, is the principal channel for conveying information about conditions within the state to Delhi. But in this instance, as in many others, the state government showed itself incapable of presenting an accurate picture of the situation to Delhi.

When the Union Government realized that it had been drastically misinformed about happenings in Madras, it made little effort to remedy the situation. No top-ranking minister was sent to Madras to investigate, except T. T. Krishnamachari, himself a Tamilian. Mrs. Indira Gandhi came on February 12, on her own initiative, and her investigations and reports were realistic and balanced. This bold action reminded people that she is one of the few political leaders in India trusted by the whole nation, and it was certainly not forgotten when a successor to Shastri had to be selected. Delhi is, of course, within the Hindi area and it is easy for the protagonists of Hindi to bring direct pressure to bear on the Union Government. It is far less easy in present circumstances for the Centre to assess the extent and intensity of feeling in areas remote from Delhi. But no serious attempt was made at any stage to do this.

The tragedy of the Madras agitation is a tragedy too common in modern India. It is only after violence has run its course that communication and negotiation become possible. The outbreak of violent protest is a sign that communication has broken down. But if communication is resumed as a concession to violence, violence

becomes a normal and efficacious instrument of political pressure.²⁰

There is no doubt that the initial impetus and much of the leadership of the agitation came from the DMK party. But it is also true that strong feeling on the language issue was not limited to DMK supporters. DMK attempted to manipulate already existing emotions and head up a broad alliance of anti-Congress forces, but the agitation quickly passed out of DMK control and there is much to suggest that DMK leaders ultimately became extremely alarmed by what was happening. Other parties did not give as active a lead as DMK, although the veteran C. Rajagopalachari, the leader of the conservative Swatantra Party, had for long been assailing the official language policy and gave active support to the agitation. The Swatantra Party as such, however, was not committed to any policy on the language issue and few other Swatantra members seem to have been active leaders in the disturbances. The Left Communists were accused of instigating trouble, but this party is as weak in Madras as it is strong in Kerala, and there is certainly little in such stories. Much of the support for the agitation, and some of the leadership, was non-party. A number of public figures, particularly educationists and lawyers, were publicly sympathetic.²¹ Finance for the agitation came from many sources and student groups were able to collect considerable sums from the public. Certain wealthy industrialists certainly supported the agitation from the beginning although Brecher probably exaggerates when he says "some anti-Congress mill-owners ... financed the students' agitation."²² The impression gained at the time by the present writer was that there was no substantial amount of finance behind the student organization and that each unit and district was left to raise what funds it needed.

It is also clear that the agitation quickly developed its own impetus and organization and finally passed completely out of control. The DMK instigated the protest; as a result of harsh police and government action, the agitation became a spontaneous and almost universal movement among students; finally, the mob took over and all restraint was lost. This in itself was highly unusual, for Madras does not boast a large number of *goondas* or professional mobsters as does Bengal. In other parts of India political disturbances frequently start among students. This is, however, very rare in

²⁰On political protest in India see Myron Weiner, *The Politics of Scarcity*, Bombay, 1963, especially chaps. 1, 7, & 8. Also David H. Bayley, "The Pedagogy of Democracy: Coercive Public Protest in India," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. LVI, No. 3, September 1962, pp. 663ff; and Richard Lambert, "Some Consequences of Segmentation in India," *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, Vol. 12, No. 4, July 1964, pp. 416–24.

²¹For example, Sir A. L. Mudaliar, Vice-Chancellor of Madras University; Dr. C. P. Ramaswamy Aiyer, Vice-Chancellor of Annamalai University; and some leading members of the bar.

²²Brecher, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

Madras State, where the University has a reputation for good discipline and students have in general held aloof from politics and allowed politicians little influence in colleges. The DMK, however, has developed a great appeal for students, partly as a result of Tamil chauvinism, partly because Madras students see a change-over to Hindi as a serious threat to their prospects.

Organization was rudimentary. The appeals of the January Anti-Hindi Conference in Tiruchirapalli and of the DMK for mourning and protest found a ready echo among students. But a student organization to guide the agitation only sprang up on January 27, by which time the principal DMK leaders were already behind bars. This was called the Tamilnad Students' Anti-Hindi Agitation Council, and although based on Madras City it very rapidly established contacts with most of the colleges in the state. In the majority of colleges Action Committees were formed. Many — but not all — of the student leaders had no connection with DMK, and DMK was not able to dominate the organization as is demonstrated by the students' refusal to return to classes and call off the agitation even when requested by the top leaders of DMK. Before the end of the agitation the police had effectively infiltrated and temporarily broken up such organization as there was, but by this time matters had passed out of control in any case.

For the first few days of the agitation there was little violence. The students abstained from classes, took out processions, burnt Hindi books, hoisted black flags, tarred Hindi signboards, and chalked up slogans. There was a little stone-throwing and fighting, but no large-scale violence until after the police had resorted to strong-arm tactics. The state-wide *hartal* on February 12 was in response to a call from the students, but it marks the passing of the agitation out of student control and the mob's seizing of the initiative.

Why were "normal constitutional channels" so little utilized? It is fair to say that in general no one in India believes that constitutional pressure is as effective as violence or the threat of it. And this agitation, like so many others in India, illustrates once again that government listens to violence more readily than to less drastic forms of protest. In the beginning the Government of Madras was not willing to talk, let alone negotiate, with student leaders. But in any case there is little scope for constitutional protest, particularly when "Section 144" (prohibiting processions and meetings) is in force or during a National Emergency. Even normally innocuous methods of protest become illegal and, if used nonetheless, tend to escalate quickly into violence. Strong action was taken by the government against a number of popular Tamil newspapers and periodicals. Whether justifiable in the circumstances or not, such actions effectively gag a normal outlet for protest. Petitions, deputations, and resolutions were generally thought to be ineffective, and there is a good deal

of evidence to support such a feeling. Within the Legislative Assembly, opposition to the official language policy was neither adequately voiced nor carefully noted by the government, and it is significant that very few people suggested that it would be helpful to summon the Assembly during the agitation.

Language policy in India has been forged in heat and reshaped under pressure. We now consider the response of official policymakers to the Madras agitation. Although our attention has been focussed on Madras, it is important to remember that the pressure against Hindi came from other directions as well, and that interests favourable to Hindi are very strongly entrenched around the seat of the Union Government in Delhi. The aim of the agitation was to influence Parliament and the Government of India,²³ where the protagonists of Hindi are influential. Government policy was therefore subject to countervailing pressures. The stronger, immediate, and more insistent pressure had for a number of years come from the supporters of Hindi; concessions to this pressure had gradually detonated an unprecedented explosion in Madras; and now policy-makers were caught in the awkward dilemma that both inaction and any conceivable policy change were bound to lead to strong adverse reaction in the North or in the South.

In the beginning the accepted position of both the Government of India and the Government of Madras was that there was neither possibility nor need of a change of policy. A meeting of the Chief Ministers of the various states in Delhi, on December 13, 1964, announced that English would continue until the non-Hindi states were ready for a change.²⁴ It seems that no minister seriously questioned this line, and Mr. Bhaktavatsalam, the Chief Minister of Madras, on his return from Delhi gave an assurance that the interests of Tamilnad would in no way suffer. When it became clear that opposition was mounting in intensity, Union and Madras State ministers repeatedly suggested that suspicions of the official policy were based simply on "misunderstandings."²⁵ But one might well suggest that most of the misunderstanding was on the part of government, which took no steps to curb rash and extreme pro-Hindi statements by people in power, obviously miscalculated the strength of feeling in the South, and made no effort to modify policy or present it in a favourable light prior to the agitation.

The Madras Government seemed to regard the agitation in the first few days as a providential opportunity to crush the opposition and refused any kind of negotiation.

²³This instance does not fit well into the pattern sketched out by Richard Lambert, *op. cit.* Unlike many other instances, this agitation was not limited by state or regional boundaries and thus it seriously threatened for a time national political equilibrium.

²⁴*The Hindu*, December 14, 1964.

²⁵See n. 19 above.

Mr. M. Bhaktavatsalam at first refused to meet student leaders, suggesting it was a matter for police action rather than discussion.²⁶ This, of course, exacerbated feelings a great deal and the students quickly lost confidence in the good intentions of the Government of Madras. The first sign of wavering came on February 1, when the Chief Minister announced that when Hindi became a medium for the UPSC examinations, places would be allocated to the various states according to a quota system.²⁷ This failed to assuage student feeling, since any conceivable quota would reduce the number of places filled from Madras. A clear indication that he was now bending before the storm came on February 9, when Bhaktavatsalam said he was now seeking a constitutional amendment to secure the place of English.²⁸ Later he publicly rejected as inadequate a draft amendment of the Official Languages Act which attempted to secure the position of English until three-quarters of the non-Hindi states asked for Hindi. Bhaktavatsalam wanted English to remain until the legislatures of *all* states asked for its replacement.²⁹ The Government of Madras therefore boxed the compass. At the beginning they said the agitation arose from entirely baseless fears, but before the end they were asking for nothing short of indefinite constitutional protection for English — exactly the demand behind the agitation. But the changes were too late and too reluctant, and at no time did the Madras Government hold the initiative.

It was obvious long before the agitation that the Union Cabinet was deeply divided on language policy. Ministers came out openly on both sides. Mr. Chagla, the Education Minister, and Mr. C. Subramaniam, Minister for Food, expressed alarm at “Hindi-ization,” while the Home Minister, G. L. Nanda, and the Prime Minister himself had called for a speeding-up of the change-over to Hindi. Nor were more junior ministers any more united on the issue. It was therefore difficult for the Government of India to present a united front in face of trouble. As late as January 7 the Prime Minister was still speaking of accelerating “Hindi-ization” and threatening stern action against agitators, Nanda (like Bhaktavatsalam) was proclaiming that no change of policy was either desirable or possible, while C. Subramaniam, Chagla, and O. V. Alagesan, Minister of State for Petroleum and Chemicals, were working for a compromise which would concede some of the demands of the agitators. From the end of January, Sanjeeva Reddy, Union Minister for Steel and Mines, a Telugu, identified himself with this group, as did most ministers from the South except the

²⁶“The Chief Minister said it was purely a question of law and order and there was no need for him to meet the students.” *The Hindu*, January 18, 1965.

²⁷*The Hindu*, February 2, 1965.

²⁸*Ibid.*, February 10 and 11, 1965.

²⁹*Ibid.*, February 19, 1965.

Finance Minister, T. T. Krishnamachari (a Tamilian Brahmin), who held aloof.

Individual ministers made widely divergent statements on Hindi as a medium for competitive examinations, or the quota suggestion, and on methods of protecting the interests of the South. Nanda and Shastri continued to affirm that the agitation was based on misunderstanding until Mrs. Indira Gandhi announced that she had found widespread and well-grounded fears in Madras State.³⁰ When the Prime Minister broadcast on February 11, he explained the old policy and reaffirmed once more Nehru's assurances that Hindi would not be imposed. But he gave no hint of a change of policy or any concession on the part of the Government.³¹ T. T. Krishnamachari broadcast in the same vein in Tamil. If the agitation had ever been based on "misunderstandings," events now showed that explanations were not enough. The same evening, after a stormy Cabinet meeting at which the text of the Prime Minister's broadcast was considered, C. Subramaniam handed in his resignation, and he was quickly joined by O. V. Alagesan.

It was this dramatic action which forced the Cabinet to consider the possibility of modifying language policy. Although on February 13 Lal Bahadur reaffirmed that Hindi must eventually become the official language of India and rejected constitutional amendment as a method of pacifying the South, thereafter he seemed to favour amending the Official Languages Act to give Mr. Nehru's assurances statutory force. On the understanding that some such action satisfactory to them would be taken, Subramaniam and alagesan withdrew their resignations on February 16. But this by no means ended the dissension within the Cabinet, for amendment of the Official Languages Act was not acceptable to a number of influential ministers. There was no consensus within Parliament. As soon as the possibility of an alteration of language policy was mentioned in official quarters, the Hindi lobby swung into action. On February 16, fifty-five MPs from eight states made public their disapproval of any statutory change, and on February 19 MPs from Maharashtra and Gujarat went on record against change, while one hundred and six Congress MPs requested the Prime Minister on February 25 not to amend the Act.³² Congress MPs from Madras maintained a strange silence. None of them spoke in the debate on the language issue in the Lok Sabha on February 18, although a delegation of Madras MPs finally met Shastri on March 12 and were apparently assured that satisfactory statutory guarantees would be given.³³ On March 22 the Prime Minister called an inconclusive meeting of the leaders of the various parties in Parliament to discuss the language

³⁰Speech at Patna reported in *The Hindu*, February 20, 1965.

³¹*Ibid.*, February 12, 1965.

³²*Ibid.*, February 12 and 20, 1965.

³³*Ibid.*, March 13, 1965.

issue. Strenuous efforts appear to have been made to stop the issue being thoroughly discussed on the floor of Parliament, for not only Congress but most of the other parties did not wish to make public their bitter divisions on this matter. Parliament seemed unable to play a constructive role in resolving the crisis.

The Congress Party found the language question very hot to handle, and for this reason it had not been considered in any detail at the annual session of the All-India Congress Committee at Durgapur from January 6–10. When events forced the issue upon the party, deep rifts became obvious. The Congress President, K. Kamaraj, former Chief Minister of Madras, joined with Sanjeeva Reddy from Andhra, Nijalingappa, Chief Minister of Mysore, and Atulya Ghosh of West Bengal to express his concern about language policy.³⁴ These men were the core of the “Syndicate” which had put Shastri into office and continued to exercise great influence in national politics. On February 22, at a meeting of the Congress Working Committee, Kamaraj called for amendment of the Official Languages Act but Morarji Desai, Jagjivan Ram, and Ram Subhag vehemently opposed him. The Working Committee finally recommended that the pace of Hindi-ization be slowed down, that the threelanguage formula be strictly enforced in all states, that Nehru’s assurances be reaffirmed, that competitive examinations be held in all the regional languages, and that places in the public services be allocated according to a quota system. On February 24 the Chief Ministers of the states met with the Union ministers and endorsed these proposals.³⁵

But this did not mean that the issue was now closed and settled. Strong pressure groups in the North were bitterly opposed to any concession at all to the non-Hindi areas. The Three-language Formula was in fact not strictly enforced either in Madras or in the Hindi states, and the proposal that it should be “strictly enforced” was rather a confession of faith than a call for action. No Madras government could in present circumstances make the study of Hindi in schools compulsory and survive. The proposals for changes in the system of recruitment to the public services are, in the opinion of many, impracticable and probably undesirable as well. The only real concession to the South was the understanding that the Official Languages Act would be amended to give statutory force to Nehru’s assurances on the language issue. But this proposal immediately ran into strong opposition in Parliament. In early April, a sub-committee of the Cabinet, consisting of G. L. Nanda, A. K. Sen, Satyanarayana Sinha, Mahavir Tyagi, M. C. Chagla, and S. K. Patil was set up to give detailed consideration to the language issue. None of the sub-committee’s members

³⁴*Ibid.*, February 1, 1965.

³⁵*Ibid.*, February 23, 24 and 25, 1965. Such meetings have been labelled by Brecher as meetings of “The Grand Council of the Republic.”

came from the South, but nevertheless it seemed to find it extremely hard to reach agreement. It finally reported back to the Cabinet on 24 May, recommending the proposals of S. K. Patil that Hindi and English should remain as joint link languages until the majority of the non-Hindi states asked for the replacement of English. The sub-committee was unhappy about the quota system and the suggested use of so many media for UPSC examinations. But it produced a draft amendment of the Official Languages Act, incorporating Nehru's assurances explicitly.³⁶

The issue then went back to the meeting of the Congress Working Committee and the Chief Ministers on June 1. This meeting of what Brecher calls "The Grand Council of the Republic" approved an elaborate resolution on language policy, in general reaffirming their earlier decisions on strict enforcement of the Three-language Formula, encouragement of Hindi and regional languages, and the use of regional languages as well as English and Hindi as media for UPSC examinations.³⁷

The question of legislation was, however, still open, although on June 15 a draft Official Languages (Amendment) Bill was made public permitting the use of English in inter-state and state-Union communications, and attempting to guarantee the place of English in administration for as long as this was desired by non-Hindi states. The Bill, together with a resolution on language policy, was admitted by the Speaker on August 25 but withdrawn after bitter argument on August 28, the reason given being that, in view of the Punjabi Suba agitation and the Kashmir crisis, the time was inopportune for the discussion of so delicate an issue. And that was the last that has been heard of Bill and resolution. To the considerable relief of many, the whole issue was shelved indefinitely while India turned her attention to the conflict with Pakistan, followed by the death of Mr. Shastri and the selection of a new Prime Minister.

The treatment of the language controversy showed up many of the strengths and weaknesses of Mr. Shastri's leadership. He was not a bold, decisive, and independent decision-maker. Nehru, at the height of his powers, might well have been able to nip the trouble in the bud by some incisive and spectacular action. Shastri preferred to proceed slowly and undramatically, sounding out opposing attitudes and allowing all interested parties to have their full say and plenty of time for sober reflection on the dangers of a onesided settlement. He was seeking a consensus and a middle course which would satisfy all parties to the dispute.³⁸ But his personal influence on the decision-making process was minimal — he seemed to play the part of a referee

³⁶ *The Hindu*, May 25, 1965.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, June 3, 1965. *cf.* Brecher, *op. cit.*, p. 164: "It was an historic session, for a consensus on language was finally reached." I would question this judgement.

³⁸ *The Hindu*, March 28, 1965.

rather than anything else. And the complicated machinery of collective leadership set up on the death of Nehru made it hard to determine the locus of responsibility. The agitation sparked off, as we have seen, a long, bitter, and inconclusive series of consultations between the Congress leadership, Parliament, the Cabinet, the state Chief Ministers, and others. The result of all this was to reveal that there was no “middle course,” and that a consensus could not be obtained. Hence the relief with which the issue was shelved.

The South was hardly satisfied with the maintenance of the *status quo*. The agitation apparently had achieved nothing, but it had brought into being an influential and well-organized student movement in Madras with contacts in most other non-Hindi states. On May 11, 1965, a delegation from this Tamilnad Students’ Anti-Hindi Agitation Council met Shastri, C. Subramaniam, O. V. Alagesan, and Chagla in Delhi.³⁹ Sporadic student strikes and a threatened resumption of the agitation in August were met by the arrest by the Madras Government of a large number of student leaders. An “All-India Students’ Anti-Hindi Agitation Council” met in Bangalore on January 7, 1966, and called for a constitutional amendment to make English the sole official language.⁴⁰ There was a little trouble among students in Madras around Republic Day, 26 January, 1966. A conference of students held in Madras by the Tamilnad Students’ Anti-Hindi Agitation Council on February 2, 1966, was followed by a two-day conference in Thanjavur on June 18 and 19 which was attended also by representatives from Mysore, Andhra, and West Bengal, and which called upon students to campaign against Congress in the 1967 General Elections.⁴¹

The agitation has certainly alienated a considerable section of the student population from the Congress Party. But how much this will affect votes remains to be seen. Certainly the position of Congress in Madras State is not now as secure as once it was. Bhaktavatsalam’s handling of the agitation was most injudicious. Had Kamaraj still been in power in Madras he could probably have kept the peace through his extraordinary ability to capture the confidence of those who disagree with him. But as it was, the agitation threatened the popular base in Madras on which Kamaraj’s amazing national influence ultimately rests. He has made great efforts since the agitation to restore the position in Madras, and he will certainly devote much attention to securing another Congress victory in the state which would restore the prestige of his party and ensure his own position on the national stage. One straw in the wind which tends to suggest that the agitation may have little influence

³⁹*Ibid.*, May 12, 1965.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, January 8, 1966.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, June 19 and 20, 1966.

on voting was the by-election in Dharmapuri Legislative Assembly constituency. Polling took place on April 10, 1965, and the Congress candidate won a seat which had previously been held by an independent, with a lead of more than ten thousand votes over his DMK opponent.⁴²

The agitation has as yet led to no significant change of policy, although it has certainly taught the Government and the Congress Party to tread delicately. It has also revealed the serious weakness of the system of collective leadership and “decision by compromise” set up after the death of Nehru. It probably was also a factor in the selection of Mrs. Indira Gandhi as Lal Bahadur’s successor. Her intervention in the crisis had shown her to be a leader of courage and independence and won her the confidence of the nonHindi areas, which Shastri had never had. The language question is sure to be an issue in the forthcoming general elections but Congress, led by Indira Gandhi and Kamaraj, is in a relatively strong position in the non-Hindi states and may well wipe out, at least in part, the reputation for ineptitude which was highlighted by the agitation. No further action to resolve the underlying dispute is likely before the elections, and even afterwards it is probable that the forces will remain so evenly balanced that the question of official language will require to be gradually adjusted over a long period of time rather than solved overnight by an *ukase* from the Union Government. The Madras agitation is over, but not forgotten. But the language crisis of which it was one expression remains a chronic affliction of Indian politics.

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⁴²*Ibid.*, April 12, 1965.